

ANNE M. PILLSWORTH

THE MADONNA OF THE ABATTOIR



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illustration by

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Paging through my daybooks, I find my eye stumbling again and again over the names of Patience's victims. Not the random victims of her physical hunger (or the books would be much longer), but those who have fallen to her spiritual appetite. I am her self-appointed accountant in this matter, and until recently I have performed the duty without painful reflection. Returning to America seems to have dispelled for me the merciful numbness of a dulled conscience, casting me back to a time when I was the servant of a god more sensitive to horrors than is Nyarlathotep, Master of Magic and my lord.

Though we'd planned to remain in Boston, where our memories are more benign, the allure of the Miskatonic University Library proved too great. Of course, we could not settle again in Arkham as Redemption and Patience Orne; those names aren't forgotten in a town that still broods over its witch-haunted past. We didn't fear that the authorities would suspect us of being the originals but that people might take our true names to be assumed ones of dubious taste. Therefore I retained the identity I'd used in London: Reverend Horace Winthrop, whose inheritance had allowed him to trade the clerical life for private studies. To complete the alias, I had illusioned myself to the age of fifty. Patience had given up neither her Christian name nor her youthful appearance. As she never does give them up, this didn't alarm me, not then. However, she hadn't deigned to stay my wife this removal, only my distant cousin Patience Crawford, traveling with me as my amanuensis. From this choice, I understood that she craved a new conquest and didn't choose to be hampered by a husband or even a father or brother.

Re-established in Arkham, we spent our days at the University, poring over its unparalleled archives of the occult. The new library was as Gothic as any old pile in Europe; the reading room had ribbed vaulting and high

lancet windows that gave it the aqueous atmosphere of a cathedral nave. Scholars infested it, each as jealous of his favorite desk as a badger of his burrow. Around the central tables, university students huddled, stifling laughs over bits of passed paper or searching the shadowed ceiling for profound thoughts. The students would have been a dull set not to notice Patience, for she was well-fed and in excellent looks, but their interest confined itself to furtive glances. That was what made one slightly older fellow stand out—he worshipped Patience with a frank and unwavering gaze. After I had intercepted his stares several days in a row, I began to look for him. Like us, he came to the reading room every morning. Unlike us, he had no stack of tomes to justify his presence, only a pocket notebook in which he sometimes scribbled. When he bent to write, a shock of brown curls fell over his forehead. His face was nearly as brown as his hair—along with the continental cut of his greatcoat, that tan made me think he’d just finished a tour abroad.

Patience never glanced at the young man, but her derisive smile betrayed that she felt the pressure of his gaze. His constant attention soon piqued her interest, and the derision softened. One morning she stayed at home, claiming weariness from a long night’s ramble. If she hoped to give her admirer a chance to approach me, her ploy worked. I had barely opened the Wormius *Necronomicon* when the chief librarian approached with the young man in tow. After apologizing for the interruption, Dr. Arkwright reminded me of the interest I’d expressed in the recently formed Arkham Art Club. Well, here was one of the club’s founders, Mr. James Pickman, who would be happy to answer my questions.

There was self-confidence, even brashness, in the way Pickman met my eyes. But he also flushed under his tan, then far outdid the retreating Arkwright in his apologies, to which he added the appealingly candid remark: “I *will* be glad to tell you about the club, Reverend Winthrop, if you

really want to know. Except the club was only my excuse to meet you. I was pumping Dr. Arkwright, and he said you'd mentioned it. The club."

I put the *Necronomicon* aside. That morning I'd been early enough to claim a nook that allowed for quiet conversation, and so I invited Pickman to take a seat. "My interest in the club isn't pressing, Mr. Pickman. I'd rather know to what I owe the honor of your inquiries."

"You'll think me too forward, Reverend, I'm sure you will, and I shan't blame you. But I've noticed the young lady usually at your side."

As I'd expected Patience to be Pickman's true object, I felt no shock at his audacity. What surprised was my disinclination to repeat her latest false history. True, it was so well-contrived as to be unsporting, but since I'd hardened myself to Patience's game, I'd never hesitated to spring her early snares. I collected myself. I said, "She's my cousin, Patience Crawford. And though I'm not her legal guardian—since at her age, she requires none—I must revise my last question. To what does Miss Crawford owe the honor of your interest?"

The formality of my response would have put off most young men. Pickman's blush deepened only mildly. "Well, sir, as Dr. Arkwright said, I'm a painter. After I left Miskatonic, I studied in London and Italy. I've just come back and set up a studio on River Street. I'm fortunate, like you, Reverend Winthrop. My uncle left me enough money so I don't have to give lessons or paint ordinary things."

I couldn't help but smile. "You paint extraordinary things, then?"

"That's what I mean to do. I believe you were in London before you came here?"

"For several years."

"Perhaps you noticed the work some fellows are doing there. Rather like the Nazarenes in Rome."

"The ones who call themselves, I can't remember, something about Raphael?"

“Yes, sir!” Pickman’s enthusiasm drew a tut from a scholar seated nearby. He lowered his voice. “The Pre-Raphaelites. I admire their ideas. Especially Mr. Hunt’s. Did you happen to see a picture of his at the Royal Academy a couple years ago? *The Awakening Conscience*, it was called.”

“Someone of my profession could hardly overlook a work with that title. The kept woman starting from her lover’s knee, stabbed to the heart by remorse. Or by the recollection of a pot she’d left on the boil.”

Sounding like he’d been startled into it, Pickman laughed. “Oh, you’re a humorist, sir. But wasn’t it a magnificent piece? A moral tale told without resorting to the Biblical. Absolutely of our time in every detail. And what detail!”

His earnestness made me sorry I had joked. “Indeed. I thought I might step through the frame and right into that drawing room.”

“The timeless made modern,” Pickman said. “Like diamonds you pry from an antique bracelet and put into a new setting.”

No doubt Pickman had made many such high-flown speeches to his club, but that hadn’t quenched his ardor. If his talent equaled his enthusiasm, Patience would like him excessively. I found myself liking him, and for a second time I experienced an unaccustomed shrinking from the chase.

As I had no obligation to hear more (at least no obligation to Pickman), I might have excused myself and left the library. Instead I said, “This is very interesting, but again, how does it concern Miss Crawford?”

Pickman glanced at the scholar who’d shushed him. As if to ensure our privacy, he moved his chair to my side of the table. “You see, sir, I want to do some paintings that speak to the essential purity of womanhood, however debased the individual’s lot might seem. Because I disagree with Mr. Hunt in this, that the woman in his painting is the one in need of awakening. If women commit such crimes, it’s because men force them into it. Women are naturally the more moral sex, don’t you think?”

Another speech he must have rehearsed, yet it too had the ring of sincerity. “Actually, I was taught that women are naturally depraved. Think of Mother Eve.”

“I don’t hold with that Puritan cant. In fact, I’ve already determined to call my paintings modern Madonnas, and I’ve started studies of potential settings.”

“Here in Arkham?”

Pickman pinched his fledgling beard between forefinger and thumb. “Yes. The first two paintings will be a *Madonna of the Drawing Room*—a woman who’s made an unhappy marriage for the money—and its proper companion, a Madonna—” He hesitated. Then, having ventured this far, he forged on. “A *Madonna of the Wharves*.”

I had lived long enough in the new Arkham (and the old) to take his meaning. “A prostitute, then.”

“Yes,” Pickman said. He lifted his chin in defiance of the world’s probable opinion. “A Madonna even there, because it’s the pursuers of these women who are the real sinners. Dr. Arkwright has offered his drawing room as one setting, and Wharf Street’s open to anyone who can stand the dirt and fish. All I’m missing is a model for the Madonnas. She has to have a particular look, so you feel that whatever intimacy she has with the low or carnal, she remains innocent.”

Pickman’s eyes were keen to have fixed on Patience. If not to feel guilt is to be blameless, then she had approached perfect innocence in life and achieved it when death had stripped away what little capacity for remorse had ever adulterated her hungry soul. The resurrection that our Master’s Communion allows had left her all wolf, and a wolf is blameless no matter what her depredations, for human compassion is beyond her ken. “I take it my cousin has the look you want?”

“Superlatively, sir. I noticed her one morning outside the library, but her hat was veiled, I had to follow you inside to see her face clearly. Since then,

I've come to the reading room just to look at her and make sketches. I've never seen anyone so right for my purpose, so I had to approach you. Do you think Miss Crawford would model for me? If it's not indelicate to speak of remuneration—"

Taking offense at the suggestion would have afforded me another chance to escape, I see that now. But I interjected, "My cousin has no need for money. If she were to model, it would be to amuse herself with a new diversion."

"I can assure you, Reverend Winthrop, everything would be aboveboard. Miss Crawford would remain fully draped, and I'd welcome any chaperone you put forward."

As it would have looked odd for me to show no concern for my young relation's safety, I nodded gravely. "Your discretion does you credit, Mr. Pickman. However, there's no need to discuss arrangements until I've discovered your proposal to Miss Crawford. If she's interested, perhaps we might visit your studio?"

"Certainly, sir!" Pickman didn't even notice the neighboring scholar's second, more irritated tut. He gave me a card and promised that he'd wait for us the next day, and the next. If we didn't come, he'd understand that Miss Crawford was unwilling, and he'd never trouble her again. "But, Reverend, can you give me some hope of success?"

The more I studied Pickman's face, the more certain I became that Patience would leap at his proposal. Succumbing for a third time to Arkham's softening influence, I determined not to mention our conversation to her. Let Pickman look into his own mirror for that marriage of innocence and worldliness he craved. "I'll tell Miss Crawford," I said. "The rest you will have to settle for yourselves."

* * *

After this encounter, I gave up trying to read and walked to the house I'd purchased on Lich Street: a modest Greek Revival with a carriage house and stables behind. On the front steps, I paused to consider the ancient cemetery opposite, where lie so many acquaintances of my earliest life. It was pleasant to have this daily reunion, however one-sided. Or was it one-sided? Nicholas Brattle's tomb stood near the street; I could see it through the budding branches of the willow whose roots had heaved a crack in its brownstone side. So vividly did I imagine the old pastor squeezing through that crack and brushing off his ethereal breeches that I even lifted my hat to his ghost. In my fancy, he returned the greeting with a headshake too eloquent of his disappointment in me, the once-promising colleague now a century-and-a-half steeped in error.

I lowered my hat to my side, entered the house and let fall my Winthrop illusion. Not only did Patience dislike most guises in private, I anticipated needing my magical energies to defy her curiosity.

Patience reclined in the ruddy twilight of the parlor, but the dart of her eyes to mine showed her languor to be feigned. She asked what had happened at the library, and when I tried to interest her in the passage I'd begun translating, she cut me short. "Was that staring young man there again?"

"Yes, I suppose."

"You suppose?" She let her hand droop to the table beside her, so that she touched a misty little mirror lying there. I knew that mirror, and how the mist would clear if Patience breathed on it, and how it would then show her the place she wanted to see or else her own face, depending upon its mood. Since I couldn't tell how compliant the mirror had been that morning, I had to admit to meeting and conversing with Pickman. At first I meant to leave his proposal out of my account, but Patience's most accurate scrying glass has always been my face, and she watched it so keenly that I gave up any thought of lying, even by omission. After all, Pickman had brought this

danger on himself; and if Patience's choice was not Pickman, it would be another soul no more deserving.

I told Patience everything that had passed between us.

Her lassitude slipped off with her lap robe, and she jumped up to pace from sofa to window bay. The carpet was too new to show her already customary prowl, for it would take months for her wraith-light tread to wear a path in its thick nap. "And what do you think about all this?" she asked.

"Why should I think anything?"

"Oh, because you always do, however you dissemble. You can't help it. Is this an adventure we'd enjoy?"

"You must determine that. It will be your adventure."

Patience mocked me with a dimple-bracketed smile. "Is he a great artist?"

"If enthusiasm makes greatness."

"It doesn't, necessarily."

"Then make up your mind when you see his work."

She heard the edge in my voice and padded over to trace the shape of my mouth with one pale thumbnail. The single illusion she generally maintained in my presence was that of her former human eyes, wide and heavy-lashed, with irises of a deep clear hazel. As I met them, the illusion dissolved, and she plumbed me with eyes like our Master's, each orb three-lobed, each lobe with its own slit pupil opening into a onyx-black void.

"You don't want me to try for this one."

"Do I want you to try for any of them?"

"You like to say you don't."

"Does what I say ever stop you?"

Patience laughed. "Never, and I should hate to confound you by changing my ways after all these years."

I should have walked away. Instead I drew her to the sofa and pressed her down beneath me. Her silks were cool, her body cooler as it arched

against mine. Cool, too, the anemone tentacles that blossomed from her palms, our Master's second gift to his undead Communicants; they caressed the sides of my neck, and then their terminal mouths opened and creased my skin between teeth like the rasp of a lamprey, but gently, not breaking it, for Patience didn't mean to feed on my blood. The pain of their pinching was slight, unimportant. The pleasure rose to drown me.

Before I sank too deep, I wondered if Pickman would have the sense I had lacked, that I still lacked, and run from Patience as from the Devil, her lord.

* * *

A pedestrian on River Street sees the water only in glimpses caught between the factories and mills that crowd its length, unlovely bulk to bulk. Pickman's studio was on the top floor of a ship chandler's warehouse. A wall of north-facing windows provided him with light, while the capacious room accommodated all the cheerful disorder of messy work: much-spattered tables, forests of brushes stuck in jars, paint boxes, palettes, canvases, and drop cloths. Linseed oil and turpentine were the pervasive odors, compellingly reminiscent of the studios I'd visited in Rome.

Two easels in the center of the room held studies for Pickman's Madonnas. Studies! The preliminary oils had finer detail than many finished paintings. Still more detailed were the pencil sketches tacked to the easels, which ranged in subject from the scrollwork on a marble mantelpiece to a heap of refuse in which each fishbone and tattered shoe, each apple core and moldy crust, was distinct. Only the Madonnas' faces were left vague, their features barely suggested. The paintings he'd completed graced the walls: landscapes of the Italian countryside and of the cliffty seacoast between Arkham and Kingsport, a scene from *Hamlet* (Ophelia in despair over the Prince—"Oh, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown"), and several self-portraits as intense as the artist. In every

work I saw mature technique, minute observation, brilliant composition and color. I admired them aloud—Patience left this duty all to me, for she drifted about the studio silent and seemingly little impressed, but her nostrils flared as if she detected a scent more enticing than the linseed oil and turpentine.

At last she lighted on a chair opposite the easels. After Pickman had hurried to shift a pigment-laden table from her skirts, she pointed to a curtain that closed off the end of the studio. “What’s back there?”

“Just a little bedroom I’ve set up for myself. And a sort of closet, for models to change in.” Pickman blushed for bed or closet or both.

“You must work late, if you make yourself too tired to go home.”

“Yes, Miss Crawford. Perhaps too often.”

“Nonsense. Devotion to one’s work is a virtue. In your case, the devotion has paid off handsomely. You will be a great artist.”

“You’re too kind!”

“Hardly. Ask my cousin.”

Pickman turned toward me. I shrugged. “I have nothing to say against Patience.”

“He has nothing to say, but what does he think?” Patience aped my second shrug. “No matter. What *I* am is not the question.”

Pickman turned back to her with undisguised eagerness. “Oh, but it *is* the question, Miss Crawford. Reverend Winthrop will have told you my hope?”

“He said you’d like me to pose for your Madonnas. Which is odd, because I’ve never considered myself in that light. Most Madonnas look so soft and simpering, or else sunk in noble melancholy.”

“Which are just the things I want to avoid, mere prettiness and sentiment. My Madonnas must look like real women, or I’ll have failed utterly.”

“You’re fond of reality, then?”

Pickman seemed confounded by the question and the way in which Patience went at once from sweetly arch to serious. "Is it possible to be otherwise?" he finally countered.

"Oh, yes. Most people don't care for reality at all, which is why pretty and sentimental pictures are popular. But I'll tell you what, Mr. Pickman. I can't bear those ghosts of women in your sketches, and so you may give them my face."

Though Pickman did not fall to the floor in gratitude, he might as well have, so great was the delight on his face. "Now I'll insist on it, Miss Crawford. You *are* too kind."

I saw the tip of Patience's tongue sample the air. Already she fed. "Shall we discuss how it's to be managed?" she asked.

"Of course. A chaperone—"

"No chaperone, please. Though you do keep a bed in your studio."

Pickman cast a mortified glance my way. I did not smile at his confusion. I was the Reverend Winthrop, after all. "Though again I've nothing to say against Patience, I must acknowledge that she delights in saying daring things she doesn't mean."

"My cousin may wish that were so," Patience said. "In fact, I always say exactly what I mean. I'm not at all missish, and while Reverend Winthrop may wish to attend us at times, from his own interest in your work, there's no need for him to neglect his studies. Still less for some poor old duenna to sit clicking her knitting needles in a corner. I believe in first impressions, Mr. Pickman, and my impression of you is that you're a parfit gentil knight, no threat to any lady's virtue."

Pickman's knightly bow was awkward. But his eyes shone.

I made a bow of my own, to Pickman. "I told you Patience would settle everything. I cannot defend you against her."

"No one can defend you, Mr. Pickman," Patience said gaily. "Be forewarned and change your mind about taking me on."

Her return to archness set Pickman at ease, and he laughed with her. It was a light laugh, with no shame to leaden it to dullness. Well, and why should he have been ashamed? I could suppose that, a young man free in Europe, Pickman had occasionally drunk too much and pursued the kind of women with which he meant to populate his Wharf Street painting. That he'd committed any more serious sins my professional intuition refused to allow, and there was also the way Patience's eyes went three-slitted when he had his back to her, escorting me from the studio. A tainted soul never roused her deeper hunger.

All the way down the stairs, Pickman reassured me that I needn't worry about Patience. I assured him that I wouldn't, and during my walk to the library I tried to convince myself that my lapses of the last few days were temporary. Soon I would regain the boon of moral indifference, for only the doughtiest soul could long sympathize with one of Patience's chosen ones. A lesser soul had to shield itself from caring, and as for which type of soul I possessed, I knew that only too well.

* * *

I might have succeeded better in distancing myself from Patience's business, but Pickman wouldn't allow it. He accompanied her home after every sitting, and each time we met, he invited me to the studio to view their progress. At first it was splendid. Patience posed in sumptuous violet silk as the Madonna of the Drawing Room and in mud-splashed linsey-woolsey as the Madonna of the Wharves. In both guises Pickman captured her exactly, from her slim foot to the delicate turn of her wrist to that habitual expression of worldly innocence that had first drawn him to her. His exhilaration made him more effusive than ever, and Patience basked in his admiration, her eyes brightening with every day that passed.

She had convinced Pickman that she wasn't easily shocked, for he now spoke frankly about his notion of the Madonnas: that they were two sides of

the same expectation that women sell themselves, either in marriage to the highest bidder or to many temporary purchasers. He anticipated with relish the furor the paintings would create at the Art Club. Some fellows would understand, but many of the members were hidebound and backward-looking. At least no one could fault his technique, I thought, nor the complementary compositions of the pair, the wife drooping from her husband and the street whore half-starting from her latest client.

But as the paintings neared completion, Pickman lapsed into uncertainty. He began to focus on Patience—to make her his end, not his means. I agreed with his complaint that neither painting did Patience justice. Even so, I attempted to redirect him to his original concept, which few could say he hadn't achieved. Perhaps only three people could fault him: myself, who understood that trepidation of any sort was an unnatural attitude for Patience; Pickman, whose fatal acuity led him to see his mistake; and Patience, who knew herself to the core. Pickman's energy turned hectic. That also nourished Patience, like a bitter dish served after the sweet.

One afternoon Pickman sat long without lifting a brush. He had been making tiny changes to Patience's face without changing its effect on the whole, for though he didn't understand it, he couldn't falsify what he saw in her. Patience stepped down from the model's dais, as graceful as a young queen despite her drab's attire, and came around to look at the canvas. She turned to the companion piece. "I think I see what's bothering you," she said.

"What is it? I hope to God you can tell me!"

"It's how you've posed me, shrinking in the drawing room, jumping in the street. You show these women as prey, but the truth is, they're huntresses, too."

Pickman continued to stare at the Madonnas. At last he said, "I'm afraid you're right, Miss Crawford. But what do you think, Reverend?"

I thought that Patience was beginning the second march of her campaign. I said, "I don't see how you can show the Madonnas as both hunted and hunter. Leave well done—very well done!—alone."

"Oh," Patience said. "I don't mean you should alter *these* paintings, Mr. Pickman. My cousin is right. You've done all you can with them. But you could paint another picture to go between."

"A triptych? But what would be the subject of the center piece, Miss Crawford?"

"The huntress, unconcealed."

"Diana?"

"Certainly not. Not from you. Talk of dimples and sugar-coating! Did you ever see a Diana with blood on her hands? Besides, you want another Madonna, not a varnished goddess."

"There's fox hunting," I put in. "I think Patience would look very well in a riding habit, wielding a crop."

Pickman shook his head. "No. No, I don't see that."

"Naturally not," Patience said. "Fox hunting is a silly pursuit. Besides, my sympathy would be with the foxes, not the bored dandies."

I watched the swish of her skirts as she remounted the dais. The hem of a petticoat flashed, like the tip of a bushy tail. "Well," I said. "I have so little sympathy with huntresses that I can make no more suggestions."

Patience's gentle smile spoke her contempt. "There was a time, cousin, when you rather fancied a huntress. And I think you still do, in your heart."

Usually sensitive to any sparring between us, Pickman was now too distracted to notice. He looked from Madonna to Madonna, then looked between them, as if at a third blank canvas. The empty air engaged him so deeply that for the first time I left the studio without him accompanying me downstairs.

* * *

Whatever Patience said after my departure, whatever agreement the two of them made, Pickman's relations with me now changed. He no longer urged me to attend sittings; indeed, when I came to his studio to watch him put the last touches to the first two paintings, his civility was cool and brittle, and he appeared jealous of any attention Patience paid me. Though she must have enjoyed his animosity, Patience told me to stay away. Besides, they wouldn't be in the studio for a while. Pickman had hired a carriage to drive them into the country, and they had just found the perfect setting for his third Madonna; she was to pose for him on site. Two weeks passed, during which I saw Pickman only when I handed Patience into his gig. His greetings grew more and more curt, until he ceased to acknowledge me altogether. Patience had become his sole focus, and it was draining him—his once-trim frock coat sagged from his stooped shoulders, and his ruddiness faded to pallor. Day by day I watched his decline, as did Nicholas Brattle, sitting upon his tomb across the road and shaking his head more and more sternly. I now wished to account him a real ghost rather than a fancy, for to be accused by Brattle was less terrible a thing than to accuse myself.

I didn't try to follow the gig, but at last I couldn't remain silent. While Patience prepared for a late afternoon jaunt with Pickman, I asked, "Do you pose as the huntress, then?"

She was arranging her hat and veil in the hall pier glass. "After a fashion."

"Though you're out in the country, I suppose it's not in a leafy glade with your sandal upon the stag's neck."

My barb went so wide of its mark that she didn't even shrug. "Pickman agrees with me about this setting. It took persuasion. However, I was determined. In fact, I had found the spot before I even suggested the new painting. It was a night when the air was fine, and I decided to walk along the Dunwich road."

“They call it the Aylesbury Pike these days.”

“They may call it what they like. I know where it goes in the end. But I didn’t have to walk all the way to Dunwich. A couple miles outside Arkham, there’s an abandoned farm. The house and barns have tumbled down. One night last winter, the farmer burned them. That was after he’d slit the throats of his wife and old mother. Weeds don’t yet sprout in the ruins, and so his story still blows in the ashes. They showed me how the farmer lingered in the yard to watch the fires. His dogs were gone mad barking, and all his stock crowded round in a panic. He sat on his stile until he froze to it, dead. Now people think the place is haunted. They’ll keep shy of it for a while.”

“It *is* haunted, if you read so much in the ash.”

She pinned up a stray curl. “It doesn’t matter. The important thing is the building he *didn’t* burn: the slaughterhouse where he used to slit the throats of his pigs. Except Pickman *will* call it an abattoir. He likes that word better—I guess he’s no longer so fond of reality, and the French makes things all far away and safe. The way your Latin and Greek used to cushion you from certain truths.”

I heard a light carriage turn onto Lich Street. There was no time for one of our old arguments. “So he’s painting you in the slaughterhouse.”

“Yes.”

“The *Madonna of the Abattoir*?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t see how that will fit his original scheme.”

“I never cared for his scheme. I like my own much better.”

Patience lowered her veil. The trailing ribbons of her bonnet brushed my sleeve as she passed, a clinging rose-red caress. I seized her shoulder, but she twisted free with a vehemence that told me she wouldn’t suffer restraint. I didn’t try again to hold her; though I too had taken the Communion of Nyarlathotep, Master of Magic, I had not passed through the

crucible of the grave as Patience had, and I knew from former trials of my strength that the merely undying are no match for the undead. “Patience,” I said. “This once. This one time. Stop before you’ve taken everything.”

Her eyes shifted again into those of our Master, which are far sharper than human eyes. It was a penetration to be feared, the more so because it skewered one to the soul, preventing any hope of evasion. “Coming here was a mistake, my heart. It’s made you remember how all those people moldering across the street used to gaze at you in your pulpit. Gaze and gape until I almost choked holding back my laughter. They worshipped *you*, not your Father and Son, and you soon got an appetite for it. You grew hungry, like me, but you’ve never dared what I have. Instead you’ve crept behind me, watching. Oh, watching! And those books of yours, where you’ve writ it all down. You think they’re confessions, but I say they’re a lecher’s history of secondhand conquests, all the dirty details put down to sustain him when there’s no fresh meat to spy on.”

Blood beat loud in my ears, but I still heard at our door the snorts and stamping of a horse galled by an impatient driver. “You’ve waited long enough to deliver this opinion of me.”

“That I haven’t. I’ve said the same a thousand times.”

“In jest, I thought.”

“Jest speaks the truth as well as sermon. Better, I think, so I’ll stop preaching.” Patience’s eyes returned to hazel, human. She pressed a gloved hand to my breast. “My heart, you knew what I was when you chose to love me.”

“I didn’t know all of it.”

“You knew enough. I haven’t changed, except back then I didn’t eat what I killed. No virtue there. That’s being a spoiled housecat, hunting for sport. Surely a tigress is less contemptible.”

A tigress, a lioness, a she-wolf. All less contemptible than a cat, or a jackal.

Patience withdrew her hand. "At any rate, it's gone too far with Pickman. And this third Madonna will be his great painting. Don't you want him to achieve that?"

I went to a sidelight. Indeed, Pickman's horse had cause for complaint, the way he jerked its mouth as he backed the gig closer to the curbstone. He looked toward the door, eyes sunk in dark circles, cheeks gone as concave and fever-blotched as a consumptive's. His lips parted, eager.

Patience rested her hand on the doorknob.

"One last thing," I said.

"Yes?"

"Should I make us ready to leave Arkham?"

She opened the door and nodded at Pickman. She turned to me. "Yes. By the end of next week, I should think."

* * *

Patience didn't come home that evening, nor the next day, nor the next five days. Apparently Pickman's work in the slaughterhouse was done, for every time I walked by the ship chandler's warehouse, his studio windows were open, and dusk until dawn they glared with lamplight. Several times I climbed the three flights to the studio door and listened to the murmur of Patience's voice and to Pickman's still lower responses. On the afternoon of the seventh day, Pickman's voice sounded so labored that I retraced my steps to Lich Street, finished packing our necessities, and shrouded the furniture in dustcovers. In the carriage house stood our recently purchased brougham; in the stable a pair of swift bays waited for the harness.

My preparations complete, I sat on the front steps and watched the graveyard opposite, where slumber the righteous men who hanged Patience. The sole true witch among thirteen condemned wretches, she alone stood tearless on the gallows, and often since our return I had seen her in the dappled moonlight under the willows, dancing victorious figures on the

slabs of her judges. She had not danced on poor Brattle however, for he had only testified to the devilish way she would smile whenever he'd preached on mercy. In the mild dusk, I watched for his ghost to emerge from the cracked brownstone tomb. I watched in vain. Ghosts have keen ears, and perhaps Brattle had overheard Patience's sermon to me and thought there was nothing more to say. He, the good old man, had urged me not to marry her. And I? Patience was right. I had known enough, soon enough, but I'd no longer found Brattle's flavor of salvation to my taste. I'd envied Patience her freedom and her will and the feral innocence that had let her enjoy their fruits; when she'd led me to her Master, I'd thought myself strong enough to emulate her. Well, the Communion has given me immortality, but not the courage to seize for myself what Patience drops as scraps for my scavenging. In the end, what can that be except an eternity of failure and guilt?

I whispered the old useless confession: "Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa." That's what brought Brattle out at last, and he nodded in time to my syllables, slow and sorrowing.

After sunset, I went inside. Not an hour later, my wine glass toppled of its own accord. With the dregs of my claret, an invisible finger wrote on the tablecloth: "Come."

I closed up the house, harnessed the bays, and drove the brougham into the alley behind the ship chandler's warehouse. At the top of the stairs, I paused. Two paintings leaned against the wall beside the studio door, the *Madonna of the Drawing Room* and the *Madonna of the Wharves*. They had been butchered, the faces of the Madonnas, Patience's face, cut from the canvas with ragged strokes. The studio was silent, but I had seen the lamps glaring as I drove up. I tried the doorknob, and it turned freely. As the door swung inward, the smell of blood billowed out.

As ever nauseated, as ever drawn, I entered.

Sketchbooks and palettes, paint boxes and easels, all the pleasant props of the studio, were piled in one corner, torn or broken or spilling disordered rainbows across the floor. In the center of the room was a huge canvas and before it a table crowded with jars and pitchers. Pickman sat beside the table, stripped to the waist like a navvy ready to perform prodigious feats of brawn, except that his arms dangled limp, and his fingertips bathed in the blood that had puddled under his deep-slashed wrists. A hundred shallower cuts scored each arm. Scored his chest and belly. Scored his face. The freshness of the cuts varied from still oozing to well-scabbed over, and so it was clear they'd been inflicted over a number of days. His head lolled to one side, so that his unmoving eyes regarded the huge canvas, on which a painted Patience stood life-sized, butcher's blade in hand. This Madonna's setting was a rough shed. Bodies hung from its rafters, heels up, necks gaping: pigs and men intermixed and interchangeable. Painted Patience wore a linen shift as simple as a night dress or a death gown; it had been white once, white as her hands, but now blood soaked them both. Blood limned the wolfish beatitude of her face, in fact limned everything in the painting from the broadest stroke to the finest: Pickman's blood, which he seemed to have used direct from the vein, or maybe mixed with water for his softer tints. Hence the pitchers, hence the jars, hence the surgeon's scalpel, fallen now into the flood beneath his right hand. From what I could see, only the scalpel had bled him—there were none of the tiny puckered wounds Patience's feeders would have left. While Pickman had lived, she'd hungered only for his genius and what it might make of her, make for her.

What it had made was transcendent nightmare, for the *Madonna of the Abattoir* was as great as Patience had claimed it would be. Facing it, I was shaken with horror and racked with admiration. My breathing quickened, then caught: I drowned again, as in her clasp.

Finally, having frog-kicked back to what sanity can remain for a creature like me, I walked to Pickman and probed his throat. The galloping

pulse I felt was in my own fingertips, for he had none. Then I looked for Patience. Between the carelessly drawn curtains of Pickman's retreat, I saw movement, the swing of a slim white foot. I crossed the studio and jerked the curtains apart, ripping several pleats from their rings. Patience looked up from the bed, swinging that one foot while she kept the other comfortably tucked under her. She still wore the Madonna's shroud, ensanguined as in the painting. Of course it was, for how else but from life could Pickman have captured the precise way blood would bloom through the linen weave? The lamps here were doused. Abloom herself, Patience sat placid in the moonlight, and sipped her material feast from the brimming painter's jar in her right hand, sucked it from the bristles of Pickman's brushes, a clotted bouquet in her left.



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